

SAIRR file

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3 February 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR:

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SUBJECT

: Viet Minh Road Rehabilitation

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1. In response to your verbal request the attached paper was prepared by [Redacted]

2. Also attached is a specially prepared map on the subject.

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Acting Special Assistant
Office of Research and Reports

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23 January 1956

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Briefing on Viet Minh Road System

The cessation of hostilities in Indochina following the Geneva agreements in the summer of 1954 enabled the Viet Minh to initiate with Chinese assistance a major road rehabilitation program. That this effort occupied the highest priority under the general Viet Minh recovery plan was evident both in public statements from Peking and Hanoi

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Less than two weeks after the Viet Minh occupied Hanoi in October 1954, surveys of road and rail conditions began and an ambitious program was announced by the Public Works and Transportation Ministry.

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By assigning army and forced labor units to road construction tasks in the fall of 1954, the Viet Minh were able to announce in January 1955 that two-thirds of all war-damaged highways had been restored. Reconstruction of roads in the Tonkin Delta was the first step in a major communications development program. By September Hanoi claimed that between 3,500 and 3,700 miles of roads had been rebuilt, though it admitted that both highway and railway bridge construction remained the chief problem in the delta and south along the coast.

During the summer of 1955, the Viet Minh was heavily engaged in construction and rehabilitation of strategic roads along the Laotian frontier in order to assure the continuing supply of the Pathet Lao. A series of gasoline, ammunition and food dumps were established along an improved system parallel to the Laotian frontier with certain dumps, supplied from the important Viet Minh supply base at Dien Bien Phu, actually located within Laotian territory in Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces.

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Forced labor units were stationed in highway yards along this limited, all-weather road system to ensure maintenance during the rainy season and to support extensive Chinese and Viet Minh military supply traffic.

A Viet Minh pronouncement on highway construction during 1955 released by the Chinese Communist New China News Agency on 22 December revealed that 2,500 miles of roads had been reconstructed or newly-built during the year. Two main trunk routes are included in this figure; one from the port of Haiphong via Son La to Laichou in the northwest, and the other extending from the rail town of Munankuan on the Chinese border through Hanoi south along the coast towards the 17th parallel. The Viet Minh also stated that the length of highways open to traffic in December 1955, was twice that of the summer of 1954.

Previously at the time of the armistice, the Viet Minh had announced that only half of the pre-World War II 7,600 mile highway system in North Vietnam was usable. In the spring of 1955, Hanoi stated that by mid-1956 the pre-war network of roads would be restored to use. It therefore seems clear that the intensive Sino-Viet Minh effort to rebuild the highway network has been completed, with a grand total of approximately 3,500 to 3,700 miles of roads announced restored since the armistice.

Of major interest is the emphasis attached by the Viet Minh to the two trunk routes. The Munankuan-Hanoi road and railway constituted the first transport artery to be restored, for purposes of receiving bloc aid shipments. The road has since been extended a considerable distance towards the demarcation line in the south. The other route from Haiphong to Laichou was in the past only a poor secondary colonial road and its rehabilitation reflects the substantial communist military supply activity along the Laotian border. Recent reliable information indicates that a spur of this road has been extended into Sam Neua from Moc Chou and is, in fact, now a limited all-weather truck route. These two trunk roads, along which bridging efforts continue, make possible the rapid movement of military forces and supplies to any point along the entire Laotian-South Vietnam border.

The announcement by the Viet Minh on 20 January 1956 that some 2,200 miles of roads would be reconstructed this year indicates a little more clearly the condition of the present road system.

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The past announcements of road restoration obviously reflected the great Sino-Viet Minh effort to restore the bulk of the road net to limited use for the movement of essential supplies. Now it is evident that 1956 rehabilitation and construction aims at the improvement of some of these roads, like the Hanoi-Son La-Laichau trunk highway serving the northwest, to limited all-weather status.

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